

The divine attributes

At the heart of philosophy of religion is the concept of God. There are many concepts of God around the world, and different religions have different views on the nature of God. However, almost all agree that God is 'maximally great' - that nothing could be greater than God. This is the conception of God we will start with. But we develop it more narrowly, and the properties of God we will discuss are those which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - the three great monotheistic traditions - have thought central. Even more narrowly, we will only look at how the debate over God's attributes has been understood and developed in the Western Christian tradition.

We start with the thought that nothing could be greater than God. Another way this thought has been expressed is that God is perfect. Augustine says that to think of God is to 'attempt to conceive something than which nothing more excellent or sublime exists' (*On Christian Doctrine*, Book 1, Chapter 7). Some philosophers claim that God is the most perfect being that could (not just does) exist.

The idea of perfection has often been linked to the idea of reality. The view is that what is perfect is more real than what is not. Perfection has also been thought to involve complete self-sufficiency, i.e. not to be dependent on anything; and not to lack anything. Again, this connects with being the ultimate reality: that which is not the ultimate reality will depend on that which is, and so not be perfect. So God is traditionally thought of as the ultimate reality - the ground or basis for everything that exists.

GOD AS PERSONAL

Before turning to the attributes of God listed in the syllabus, we may ask why these properties have been thought to belong to God. Part of the answer is that many religions have thought that God is 'personal'. Properties that essentially characterize a person include intellect and will. The intellect is characterized by rationality and knowledge, the will by morality, freedom and the ability to act (power). (Some philosophers argue that to lack either intellect or will is to lack perfections - things without either intellect or will are not as great as things with intellect and will. Certainly we prize these abilities very highly. So to be perfect, God must have both intellect and will, i.e. be personal.)

Intellect and will are properties of mind. If God is a person, he is so in virtue of being a mind. Being perfect, if God is a mind, then he is a perfect mind. He will have perfect intellect and perfect will. Perfect intellect involves perfect wisdom, perfect rationality and perfect knowledge (omniscience). Perfect will involves perfect goodness and perfect power (omnipotence).

However, if God were a person, he would be very unusual. As the most perfect possible being, God cannot become more perfect; nor can God become less perfect, as then he would not be the most perfect being possible, and so not God. So unlike other persons, it seems that God cannot change. Persons also have bodies. But the most perfect being can't have a body, at least literally.

1. Anything made of matter changes over time.
2. Anything made of matter has parts.
3. Whatever has parts depends on them for its existence.
4. If God were made of matter, God would change and depend on his parts.
5. Being perfect, God can't change and God doesn't depend on anything for his existence.
6. Therefore, God can't be made of matter.

For these reasons, philosophers have said God is personal rather than a person, that is, God has attributes essentially associated with being a person, but God is not a person, because he does not change and does not have a body.

OMNISCIENCE

Perfect knowledge is usually taken to mean 'omniscience'. The most obvious definition of omniscience is 'knowing everything' (Latin *omni*-, 'all'; *scient*, 'knowing'). But we need to remember that God is the most perfect possible being, and perhaps it is impossible to know everything. For example, if human beings have free will, then perhaps it is not possible to know what they will do in the future. So let us say for now that omniscience means 'knowing all the truths that it is possible to know'.

Omniscience is not just a matter of what God knows, but also of how God knows. Aquinas argues that God knows everything that he knows 'directly', rather than through inference or through understanding a system of representation (such as language or thinking in terms of propositions) (*Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 14, Article 5, 6). Other philosophers disagree, and argue that if God doesn't know all true propositions, then there is something that God doesn't know; so God has propositional knowledge as well as direct knowledge.

OMNIPOTENCE

Power is the ability to do things. As perfect, God will have perfect power, or the most power possible. The most obvious definition of omnipotence is 'the power to do anything' (Latin *omni*-, 'all'; *potent*, 'powerful'). But does 'anything' include, for instance, the logically impossible? Could God make $2 + 2 = 5$? Could God create a married bachelor? Some pious philosophers have wanted to say yes - logic is no limit on God's power. However, there is simply no way we can meaningfully say this.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 25, Article 3

Aquinas argues that the correct understanding of God's omnipotence is that God can do anything possible. What is impossible is a contradiction in terms - the words

that you use to describe the impossible literally contradict each other. So any description of a logically impossible state of affairs or power is not a meaningful description, because it contains a contradiction. What is logically impossible is not anything at all.

Thus, the limits of the logically possible are not limitations on God's power. Even if God can't do the logically impossible, there is still nothing that God can't do.

SUPREME GOODNESS

There are two ways of understanding perfect, or supreme, goodness. If goodness just is perfection, then saying God is perfectly good is just to say that God is perfectly perfect - or the most perfect possible being. There is more than one way to be perfect (including, as we've seen perfect power and perfect knowledge), and God is perfect in all ways. This is a metaphysical sense of 'goodness'.

The other sense of 'goodness' is the moral sense. In this sense, 'God is perfectly good' means that God's will is always in accordance with moral values.

Plato and Augustine connect the two understandings of perfect goodness. What is perfect includes what is morally good; evil is a type of 'lack', a 'falling short' of goodness. If evil is a 'lack' or 'failure', what is morally good is more perfect than what is not.

ETERNAL AND EVERLASTING

Being perfect, God is self-sufficient, dependent on nothing else for existence. If something brought God into existence, God would be dependent on that thing to exist. If there were something that could end God's existence, then God is equally dependent on that thing (not exercising its power) to continue to exist. If God depends on nothing else, then nothing can bring God into existence nor end God's existence. And so (if God exists) God's existence has no beginning or end.

There are two ways in which this can be expressed. If God exists in time, then God's existence is everlasting - God exists throughout all time. If God exists outside time, then God's existence is eternal - God is timeless. In this case, God has no beginning or end because the ideas of beginning and end only make sense in time - something can only start or stop existing in time. God is not in time, so God cannot start or stop existing.

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

These two interpretations of the relationship of God to time can be understood in a broader context of the relation of God to creation. The idea of transcendence marks the way God is very different from creation. First, God is 'outside' or 'goes beyond' the universe. Since God is self-sufficient and also traditionally said to be the creator of the universe, clearly God is not reducible to the universe. Second, God is not spatial or physical as the universe is, and many philosophers argue that

God is eternal, transcending time. Third, while God is personal, he has intellect and will in quite a different way from persons.

However, emphasising God's transcendence can make it seem that God is very remote from us. The claim that God is immanent marks the close connection between God's existence and the existence of everything else. For example, it is said that God is omnipresent, i.e. that he exists everywhere - in everything that exists, God is 'there'. In being everywhere, God knows everything from the 'inside'. Some thinkers also argue that God is everlasting, immanent in time and so in human history, giving a sense that we work alongside God in producing what is morally good.

Immanence without transcendence - God as wholly immanent - would lead to 'pantheism', the view that God and the universe are the same thing. It would also lead to a denial of God being personal - since the universe isn't. So transcendence is necessary for the traditional conception of God; immanence is necessary to prevent that God being impossibly remote from us.